Transjordan and Israel: Examining the Foundations of a Special Relationship

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With the Great Arab Revolt in 1915, the Hashemite family was catapulted to the forefront of Middle Eastern politics and became the literal symbols of Arab unity. Even after their failure to create a single Arab state, and the defeat of Prince Faisal at the hand of the French at Damascus the Hashemites remained the most legitimate political leaders of Arabism to the Arab public. It is with this legacy that Prince Abdullah was handed the state of Transjordan by the British in 1921. How then, could Abdullah the son of Sherif Hussien, the man that began the Arab revolt, have established a cordial relationship with the Zionist Movement?

Even before its creation the idea of Israel had been a symbol of colonialism and the nearest threat that the "Arab Nation" faced. However, even with this dangerously heavy stigma, Abdullah secretly maintained direct relations with the Yishuv and later Israel on almost all levels. The desire for cooperation between Abdullah and the Zionist movement was not caused by any natural amity for each other. The roots of cooperation between the two parties were real political, economic and military objectives that could have not been secured without the combined effort and support of Israel and Transjordan. The objectives that Abdullah hoped to achieve through his relationship with the Zionist movement were the creation of an ally to secure the position of his state in the region as well as the creation of an opportunity to expand the size of his territory. However, the main driving purpose behind Abdullah's relationship with the Zionist Movement, and later Israel, was the prospect of a viable and secure state from the territory given to him by the British.

The high commissioner's first visit to Transjordan, in Es-Salt. August 1920.

The Israeli and Transjordanian states were never destined allies and that in fact both states had ambitions that involved the absorption of the other state as well as a mutual fear of each other. Abdullah for example had ambitions for total control over the entire territory of Palestine including areas under Zionist control and attempted to advocate the advantages of such a state to both Britain and the Zionist movement[1]. The Zionist movement itself also had territorial ambitions as it viewed the protectorate of Transjordan as an integral part of Biblical Israel and desired to create settlements on

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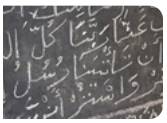

both sides of the Jordan River[2]. Aside from plans that involved each other's territories both states were also fearful of the expansion of the other party's territories. There were certain elements within Israel that did not desire the annexations of the West Bank by Transjordan. One example of fear being generated by the possible expansion of Transjordan is Moshe Sharett's telegram to Bechor Shirtrit when he said, "*Without being able to totally remove from the agenda the possibility of the annexation of the Arab part of Western Palestine to Transjordan, we must prefer the establishment of an independent Arab state within Palestine.*", such sentiments were also echoed to some extent by David Ben-Gurion[3]. We can see from this that the relationship that developed between Transjordan and Israel was not completely friendly and amiable as both parties were fearful of each other. The cooperation between Israel and Transjordan can even be perceived to be one that is fostered by both parties in order to remove any pretext of conflict that may arise between them.

There are uniquely Transjordanian circumstances that existed from the very beginning of its establishment in 1921 that drew Abdullah closer to the Zionist movement. The concept of Transjordan as an invented state is something that is highly recognized. The struggle against the lack of legitimacy for Transjordan is also a widely recognized problem that Abdullah faced. Winston Churchill perhaps provided the most damning quote against Transjordanian legitimacy when he said that he created it with a stroke of his pen on a Sunday afternoon[4], which framed the perception of the new state in the region as artificial. The new protectorate of Transjordan also did not have much of a historical legacy to draw on as it lacked large urban centers. Amman the capital of this new state was merely a Circassian village of no more than 2000 people when the protectorate of Transjordan was created[5].

As a result of this lack of historical or political legacy Transjordan's legitimacy and sovereignty were constantly being called into question by almost all states around it. To Syria the new protectorate was a part of Southern Syria and thus an illegitimate state. To Ibn Saud the new protectorate of Transjordan was an extension of the Arabian Peninsula and he on occasion did manifest very clear intentions on annexing parts of the protectorate's territory. Ibn Saud for example threatened to invade Aqaba in 1920's as well as demand from the British to give him a direct border with Syria that would separate the two Hashemite Kingdoms of Transjordan and Iraq[6]. Thus one of Abdullah's objectives in the build up to the 1948 war was to secure legitimate recognition for Transjordan in order to ensure its survival in the region. With hostility from Saudi Arabia and Syria and the ambition of Faisal in Iraq, Abdullah only had one more entity on his border that he could hope to persuade into recognizing his state and that was the Zionist movement. Abdullah's need for recognition met perfectly with the Zionist leadership's need for future recognition of the state of Israel, it was a perfect meeting of interests. The Yishuv leadership hoped that their relationship with Abdullah would allow them to gain the recognition of an Arab state, which would increase the security of their position in the region[7]. Abdullah as well saw that cooperation and recognition from the Zionist movement would help him secure his state in the region against many of the surrounding Arab states[8]. This need for legitimacy for both the leaderships of the Yishuv and Transjordan allowed for a marriage of convenience to come about. Both states could only turn to each other for recognition due to the hostility of the surrounding states and hoped that their combined efforts would secure a permanent position for both their states in the region.

An important factor in Zionist-Transjordanian relations was the economic state of protectorate of Transjordan following its creation. The territory of Transjordan was an economically unique entity in the region due to the fact that did not possess any significant resources such as oil. Furthermore, the cultivatable land that it did possess was only a narrow strip that clung to the Jordan River and even then the output of these farms fell short of the descriptions of the Jordan valley as "*undulating fields of wheat and barley*"[9]. These circumstances in Transjordan thus resulted in the area not being able to generate any large urban centers to match those in surrounding countries. This also meant that Transjordan was incapable of generating any substantial income independently.

In addition, the hostility of the surrounding states such as Saudi Arabia and Syria meant that Transjordan could not hope for any economic assistance from the surrounding Arab states. Thus, the only remaining option for Abdullah to strengthen the Transjordanian economy in order to increase the capabilities of his state and the standard of living for his subjects was economic cooperation with the Zionist movement. Abdullah's personal experience may have also caused him to view economic cooperation as a positive on a personal level which is derived from his experience in Istanbul where he met many Jewish merchants, physicians and scholars and hoped that their Jewish counterparts in the Palestine Mandate would help him improve the economic conditions of his new state[10]. Such an endeavor was not difficult to begin by Abdullah as he could easily play on the desire of certain elements in the Zionist movement for land and investment on the eastern bank of the Jordan River as well as the desire of the Zionist leaders for economic cooperation with an Arab state that could lead to political cooperation.

A few significant examples of such cooperation between the Yishuv and Transjordan are the construction of a power plant by Zionist entrepreneur Pinhas Rutenberg as well as the joint Jewish-Transjordanian venture to extract potash from the Dead Sea[11]. Abdullah was also not shy in conveying assuring messages to draw in Jewish capital when he said in 1933, "*The Jews in all the world will find in me a new Lord Balfour; and even more than this, Balfour gave the Jews land which was not his to give, I pledge my own land*."[12]. However, Abdullah was aware of the political impact that such economic cooperation could cause and made every effort to keep such cooperation out of the public realm of knowledge. Abdullah's determination to continue conducting business with the Zionist movement even after British resistance and public rioting shows the desperate circumstance that the Transjordanian economy was enduring at the time. Abdullah also came to an agreement with the Zionist movement that he would provide them with information regarding the dealings between the Arab states and they would provide him with monetary gifts[13]. Cooperation with the Zionist movement was seen by Abdullah as the only path toward economic development in order to create a stronger state and he would not let political rhetoric or ideology hinder him his efforts in doing so.

Aside from the political and economic support that Abdullah was securing for Transjordan through his cooperation with the Zionist movement he also maintained this relationship for more aggressive polices. These aggressive policies that Abdullah wanted to pursue were plans to expand his holdings and territory beyond the protectorate of Transjordan. These ambitions for a large state in the Middle East that Abdullah wanted to create even predated his placement as the regent over the protectorate of Transjordan. The arrival of Abdullah on the territory of Transjordan was even motivated by his ambitions of taking control of Syria from France and combining it with the throne of Iraq promised to him by the British[14].

The British essentially gave Transjordan to Abdullah as a consolation prize in order to deter him from sparking a conflict with France; he was however not satisfied and maintained his ambitions of taking control of Syria. Abdullah's ambition of territorial expansion was also motivated by the loss of the Hijaz to Ibn Saud[15]. Abdullah's ambition for taking Syria also caused him to come at odds with the British, a circumstance that rarely occurred during the entire length of their relationship. This strain came when Britain forced Abdullah in 1924 to expel all suspected Arab nationalists from Transjordan in order to weaken Abdullah's capability at striking France in order to protect their own interests[16]. Yet, Abdullah still continued to pursue his plan for a Greater Syria into the late 1940's even after Syrian independence. Abdullah twice presented to the Arab League a resolution that justified and dictated a plan in which to facilitate the abortion of the newly independent Syrian state by Transjordan, the move quickly drew condemnation from across the region as Transjordan's three main rivals, Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia joined together to condemn the actions of Abdullah[17]. However, even before such incidents of resistance on the part of Syria to Abdullah the Hashemite Emir was already taking steps to strengthen his position in order to overcome such obstacles. Abdullah's need to increase the capabilities of his new state in order capture Syria in turn focused his attention to the Arabs and Arab lands of Mandate Palestine.

This concern that Abdullah had regarding Arab Palestine and Palestinians at the time is another point of convergence of Transjordanian and Zionist interests. For each party the Palestinians represented different things, for Abdullah the Palestinians and their land represented a possible initial power and population base that could be used to fuel future expansion while for the Zionist movement the Palestinians represented their direct competitors to the land and resources present in Mandate Palestine. Through these perspectives a common perception arose in minds of Transjordanian and Yishuv leadership that an organized and established Palestinian state represented a threat to them[18]. Abdullah's concern for Palestine was always secondary to plans of capturing Syria. It wasn't until 1947 that it came to hold a more significant importance in the concerns of the Transjordanian King. Even prior to it occupying a role of prominence the political movements and figures in Palestine that demand total independence gained the mutual animosity from Abdullah and the leadership of the Yishuv. Furthermore, Palestine and Transjordan were already drawn together through economic interests. With both areas being part of the Palestine mandate, free movement across the Jordan River caused Transjordanians to serve as seasonal labor in Palestine and Palestinians to serve as bureaucrats in Transjordan, both regions also shared a common currency, the Palestine pound[19].

As a result the economic well being of Transjordan became tied to Arab Palestine. Consequently, the potential loss of Arab Palestine through conquest or independence forecast an almost total collapse of the Transjordanian economy as its workers would be deprived of jobs and its government would be deprived of educated employees. So the increased concern of Abdullah and his opposition of Arab nationalists through the late 1940's as tensions between the Jewish and Arab communities in the region increased is quite understandable as it threatened the economic welfare of his state. So it was with the hope of gaining control over Arab Palestine that Abdullah worked to undermine cooperation between elements of the Palestinian polity by supporting British action in cracking down on and

removing elements such as Mohammed Amin Al-Husayni from the area[20]. The Zionist movement also supported such action against the yet uncreated Palestinian state and found Abdullah due to interest that he had in the region the perfect partner in ensuring that a Palestinian state would not be created.

The outbreak of violence caused by the Arab rebellion that lasted from 1936 to 1939 and the failure of various attempts at partition such as the Peel Commission as well as “White Paper” caused a shift in the policy of the Zionist movement away from compromise with local Arabs in the Palestine towards cooperation with Arab leaders outside of Palestine as the only possible path towards generating positive results for the Zionist endeavor[21]. Abdullah became the prime figure of possible cooperation regarding the situation in Palestine for the Zionist movement due to the already existing economic and diplomatic relationship between the two. Furthermore, the leadership of the Yishuv saw the benefit from the occupation of Arab lands in Mandate Palestine by Abdullah’s Legion as it would give them a friendly and reliable neighbor while simultaneously disrupting the focus of Palestinian nationalists by giving them a new force to contend with in the form of Transjordan. Confirmation of this stance can be seen from a meeting between King Abdullah and Golda Meir a few days prior to the declaration of the Israeli state when Meir stated that Israel would prefer that the Arab lands of Palestine be occupied by Abdullah as opposed to them emerging as a sovereign state[22]. So it was on this semblance of an agreement that Israel and Transjordan marched toward the 1948 Arab-Israel war with each hoping to achieve their respective objectives through mutual assistance and cooperation.

The 1948 Arab-Israel war saw the culmination of almost three decades of cooperation between the Yishuv’s leadership and the Kingdom of Transjordan. Economic cooperation, the convergence of political objectives and mutual fear of a Palestinian state had all worked towards creating one of the most consistent and stable relationships in the Middle East. The war however was not just an arena where old agreements between the Zionist movement and Abdullah but a time period where Transjordan attempted to achieve it objectives to the fullest extent possible. One such incident was the Abdullah’s reaction to the incident of Deir Yassin where the Arab League accepted a message from him stating that he would only move to protect Palestinians if the other Arab states accepted that his forces would occupy Palestine[23]. Through this initiative Abdullah was able to gain Arab support for his endeavor to occupy Arab Palestine and achieve the agreement that was already reached with Israel prior to the conflict.

Abdullah also had all armed Palestinian groups within the territory of the Arab Legion disbanded or brought under his control. Abdullah’s objective of expansion was not limited to actions that complemented Israeli interests, as there was a point of friction between the two parties. That point of conflict or more appropriately the point where an agreement could not be reached was Jerusalem and the surrounding area which both parties did not discuss as to not hamper cooperation on other aspects of their relationship. However, when the war did take place Abdullah’s interest of both expanding his state and legitimizing it in the Arab world drove him toward Jerusalem. It was this unique circumstance where taking Jerusalem would not go against agreements reached with Israel prior to the war as well as the immense prestige that it would offer the Transjordanian state, which caused it to become the only point in the 1948 war where the Arab Legion directly and deliberately engaged Israeli forces[24]. Nevertheless, the mutual needs of Israel and Transjordan for each other overshadowed the conflict taking place in Jerusalem between their forces.

Israel still needed Transjordan as it represented the only Arab state in the region that was willing to provide it with a neutral relationship if not support. Transjordan also needed Israel as Abdullah perceived that possible expansion such as the Greater Syria plan would be easier to achieve with a friendly Israeli state due to the increased hostility from Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and certain elements in Iraq and Lebanon. His attempt at ensuring this friendly relationship lasted can be seen from the conduct of the Arab Legion during the war where it did not attempt to attack or occupy any land allotted to the Jews according to the United Nations partition plan as was agreed upon by Abdullah and the Yishuv prior to the war[25]. The Arab Legion also did not attempt to cut Israel in half by moving toward the Mediterranean Sea, and when soldiers were questioned regarding their lack of action the response that they “had no orders” became a hallmark of Transjordan’s stance during the 1948 war. Transjordan also used the war and it relationship with Israel as an opportunity to eliminate the military capabilities of the other Arab states. This stance is perhaps best put by Glubb Pasha when he wrote to a British officer stating that “*if the Jews are going to have a private war with the Egyptians and the Gaza government, we do not want to get involved. The gyppies and the Gaza government are almost as hostile to us as the Jews*!”[26], while his statements regarding hostility between his own forces and the Jews is essentially hyperbolic, the actions of Transjordan during the war clearly displays that Transjordan was hostile not only to Egypt but a number of the other Arab states as well. Following the first ceasefire the Legion sat calmly by as Israel picked off each of the Arab states one by one[27] causing it to be the only Arab state to end the war without suffering major losses as well as the only state to make substantial territorial gains.

Following the end of the conflict King Abdullah went on to annex the territory he had occupied during the 1948 war and in turn transformed Transjordan into Jordan. King Abdullah would go on to be assassinated by a Palestinian nationalist in 1951 on his way to Friday prayer due to his collaboration with the Zionist movement as well as his own actions at quashing the Palestinian state. It is at this moment of his death that we can see the achievement of perhaps one of more important goals that Abdullah and the Jordanian government were trying to achieve. That goal being the creation of a lasting and legitimate Jordanian state from what was an illegitimate protectorate at it creation in 1921. This fear that Transjordan would fall apart if Abdullah died prematurely was something that consistently haunted the Zionist movement and elements within Transjordan as they were collaborating prior to the 1948 war[28]. At the end of the conflict however, Abdullah through his collaboration with the Zionist movement not only established the permanence of the Jordanian state but also won it an ally in the form of Israel that would continue to support its existence long after Abdullah had died.

By taking in the entire scope of the interactions between the Zionist movement and Abdullah we can see that their relationship was not merely motivated by the desire for territorial expansion. Both states due to their beginnings as British mandates had become economically intertwined. The aggression of states around them also drove their economic cooperation, as they each became the only viable option toward creating sustainable economic development to one another. The Yishuv leadership and Abdullah also had a number of political goals regarding the legitimacy of their own states that coincided. Both states were seen as artificial creation in the region and by supporting each other they would ensure their own survival. Palestinian nationalism also became a mutual threat to both Transjordan and Israel causing them to collaborate. Aside from the political and economic aspects of convergence between the Zionist movement and Transjordan there was a military aspect that also drew them together. Both forces recognized each other as being potent fighting bodies and thus fostered good relations in order to avoid direct combat with one another as well as the securing of an ally that would be capable of providing aid when the circumstance called for it. It is this convergence of economic, political and military interests as well as the hostility of the surrounding states that drew Abdullah and the Yishuv together and not mere greed as is touted by Arab nationalists. It is this convergence that drove Abdullah the son of the man who began the Arab revolt, to cooperation with the Zionist movement in order to secure the future of his territory in the region as a sovereign and legitimate state.

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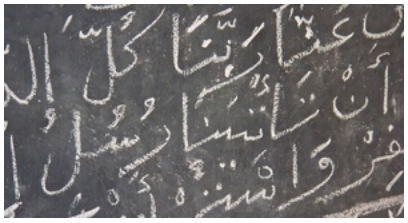

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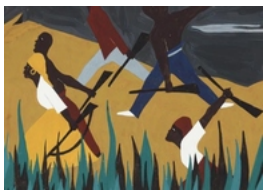

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